Nixon wins court victory on tapes

F Post 4/14/78

WASHINGTON (AP) — Richard M. Nixon won a Supreme Court victory Tuesday — copies of his most famous White House tape recordings will not tour the cocktail circuit.

The high court voted 7-2 to bar immediate public release of the 30 tapes played at the 1974 Watergate cover-up trial of Nixon's top aides. But the justices steered clear of the expresident's contention that allowing the public to hear the tapes would invade his privacy.

Nixon challenged a 1976 decision of the U.S. circuit Court of Appeals in Washington that would have made copies of the tapes immediately available for broadcasting and commercial reproduction.

Lawyers for Nixon argued that homes sales of 22 hours' worth of White House conversations among Watergate figures would lead the tapes being "played at cocktail parties and in satiric productions."

They said such exploitation of the tapes would cause Nixon great embarrassment, even "mental anguish."

"We're gratified with the decision," said Nixon attorney William H. Jeffress Jr., who argued the case for the former president.

The court's decision centered on its narrow view of a common-law right older than the Constitution.

"It is clear that the courts of this country recognize a general right (of the public) to inspect and copy public records and documents," Justice Lewis F. Powell Jr. wrote for the court.

He added, however, that "the right is not absolute."

During arguments over the tapes case, the court was told its decision could return to haunt it — in lawsuits seeking access to tape recordings of its own public proceedings.

Transcripts of the White House tapes were widely publicized during the criminal trial of former Attorney General John Mitchell and Nixon aides H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. All 30 transcripts were quoted in part or in their entirety in newspapers and other publications, and the decision does not affect further use of transcripts.

Filing suit in 1976 to have copies made of the tapes, which were played for jurors and courtroom spectators, were the three television networks, the Public Broadcasting Service, the Radio-Television News Directors Association and Warner Communications Inc.

Warner wanted to reproduce the tapes as records and cassettes, and subsequently prepared a two-recording set in anticipation of a favorable Supreme Court ruling.

Those plans must be scraped now, but there remains a chance that the public will someday hear at least some of those 30 tapes.